

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE  
SENATE EDUCATION STANDING COMMITTEE**

March 24, 2021

9:03 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Senator Roger Holland, Chair  
Senator Gary Stevens, Vice Chair  
Senator Shelley Hughes  
Senator Peter Micciche  
Senator Tom Begich

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

All members present

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

CONFIRMATION HEARING(S)

Professional Teaching Practices Commission  
Danette Peterson - Fairbanks

- CONFIRMATION ADVANCED

SENATE BILL NO. 72

"An Act relating to civics education, civics examinations, and secondary school graduation requirements; and providing for an effective date."

- MOVED CSSB 72(EDC) OUT OF COMMITTEE

Motion to approve 32-LS0485\W as a Senate Education Standing Committee bill for introduction to the Senate.

- MOTION PASSED

SENATE BILL NO. 6

"An Act relating to retirement incentives for members of the defined benefit retirement plan of the teachers' retirement system and the defined benefit retirement plan of the Public Employees' Retirement System of Alaska; and providing for an effective date."

- BILL HEARING CANCELED

## PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: SB 72

SHORT TITLE: SEC. SCHOOL CIVICS EDUCATION

SPONSOR(s): SENATOR(s) STEVENS

02/05/21	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/05/21	(S)	EDC, CRA
03/10/21	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
03/10/21	(S)	Heard & Held
03/10/21	(S)	MINUTE(EDC)
03/19/21	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
03/19/21	(S)	-- Invited & Public Testimony --
03/22/21	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205
03/22/21	(S)	Scheduled but Not Heard
03/24/21	(S)	EDC AT 9:00 AM BUTROVICH 205

## WITNESS REGISTER

DANETTE PETERSON, Appointee  
Professional Teaching Practices Commission  
Department of Education and Early Development (DEED)  
Fairbanks, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified as the governor's appointee to the Professional Teaching Practices Commission.

TIM LAMKIN, Staff  
Senator Gary Stevens  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Explained the committee substitute for SB 72.

JULIE TRUSKOWSKI, State Coordinator  
We The People  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of SB 72.

DAVID NEES, representing self  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in favor of SB 72.

JOANNA WASSILLIE, representing self  
White Mountain, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in favor of SB 72.

CHRISTINE HUTCHISON, representing self  
Kenai, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in favor of SB 72.

#### **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[9:03:34 AM](#)

**CHAIR ROGER HOLLAND** called the Senate Education Standing Committee meeting to order at 9:03 a.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Stevens, Begich, Hughes, Micciche, and Chair Holland.

#### **CONFIRMATION HEARING(S)**

##### **Professional Teaching Practices Commission**

[9:04:10 AM](#)

**CHAIR HOLLAND** announced the confirmation hearing of Danette Peterson to Professional Teaching Practices Commission.

[9:04:37 AM](#)

**DANETTE PETERSON**, Appointee, Professional Teaching Practices Commission, Fairbanks, Alaska, said her name was put forward for the Professional Teaching Practices Commission (PTPC) by the Fairbanks Education Association. She is from Chicago, earned a Juris Doctor degree, practiced law in Chicago for about 11 years, and then got a teaching certificate and master's degree as a reading specialist and literacy coach. Education is her second career, but it has always been a passion.

**MS. PETERSON** said she has taught middle school and high school and gifted education. She is now at Hutchinson High School, a career and technical education (CTE) program. She has been a BP teacher of the year nominee for four years. She coaches We the People and is involved with speech and debate and other school activities. She has served on district committees and is part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks School of Education accreditation committee. She has served in different roles with the Fairbanks Education Association. She received an NEA grant for an early career education mentoring program for new teachers.

**MS. PETERSON** said that as an educator, it is her mission that students enter communities as active, informed citizens, which is a key aspect of maintaining any democracy. This means giving back to the community. In her classes, students do not debate. They discuss civilly. She wants students and colleagues to feel empowered. In the education profession, all must act

professionally, including monitoring and disciplining its own members. No one relishes disciplining a fellow members of a profession, but at times it is required in order to uphold the high standards required of the profession and to benefit the children of Alaska. All nine members of the PTPC act with one common goal, to provide the best education possible for Alaska's children. She interviewed with the governor's staff just before the pandemic hit. So much has changed. The pandemic has presented new challenges and new opportunities. PTPC may see unique cases because of the pandemic. Educators should seek to preserve the best aspects of teaching that resulted from the pandemic. Some children who did not thrive in brick-and-mortar classrooms succeeded with virtual learning. The pandemic shone a light on diverse needs met by educational institutions. She hopes to use her legal and educational background to benefit the children of Alaska and all members of the state.

CHAIR HOLLAND noted that she has an impressive resume and is an accomplished attorney and educator with awards and a grant recipient.

SENATOR STEVENS shared that this is one of the finest interviews he has heard. He appreciates her change of heart in leaving law and to enter teaching. The PTPC is crucial and can remove certifications from teachers. She understands those issues of discipline. He is comfortable hearing that she can do the job.

SENATOR HUGHES shared that she was impressed with her resume. The Education Committee will be hearing SB 72 regarding civics education and Ms. Peterson has done many activities related to civics, especially with We the People. She asked if Ms. Peterson has had chance to look at SB 72 and has any insight about civics education in the state.

MS. PETERSON said she has not looked at SB 72 but a year ago she was a member of the curriculum committee that rewrote the social studies curriculum in Fairbanks. The committee moved to competencies and not just standards. The committee spent a lot of time looking at civics because surveys showed the public wanted it addressed more fully in this political climate. The committee rewrote curriculum to infuse civics in each and every course taught, not just government, so that students see examples of how to be engaged in civics. That means bringing in guest speakers, such as Alaska Supreme Court Judge Sue Carney. Hutchinson High School was set to participate in We the People nationally before the pandemic. Hutchinson High School participates in Kids Voting, We the People, National History

Day. It has to be way of life and a habit and not a single course.

CHAIR HOLLAND called on Senator Stevens.

[9:20:49 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS moved to recommend Ms. Peterson's appointment to the PTPC be forwarded to a joint session for consideration.

[9:21:05 AM](#)

At ease

[9:21:15 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND asked Senator Stevens to withdraw his motion.

[9:21:25 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS withdrew his motion.

[9:21:30 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND opened public testimony and after ascertaining there was none, closed public testimony. He solicited a motion.

[9:21:55 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS stated that in accordance with AS 39.05.080, the Senate Education Standing Committee reviewed the following and recommends the appointment be forwarded to a joint session for consideration:

Professional Teaching Practices Commission  
Danette Peterson - Fairbanks

CHAIR HOLLAND reminded members that signing the reports regarding appointments to boards and commissions in no way reflects individual members' approval or disapproval of the appointees; the nominations are merely forwarded to the full legislature for confirmation or rejection.

[9:22:30 AM](#)

At ease

### **SB 72-SEC. SCHOOL CIVICS EDUCATION**

[9:24:16 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND announced the consideration of SENATE BILL NO. 72 "An Act relating to civics education, civics examinations, and secondary school graduation requirements; and providing for an effective date."

CHAIR HOLLAND noted that the committee had adopted the committee substitute (CS) for SB 72, work order 32-LS0478\B, as the working document and had heard public testimony. He asked the bill sponsor, Senator Stevens, for any comments.

9:24:33 AM

At ease

9:24:46 AM

SENATOR GARY STEVENS, speaking as sponsor of SB 72, stated that the committee substitute removes the need to pass an exam but says that students will take the exam. It directs the Department of Education and Early Development (DEED) to develop a unique, Alaskan civics curriculum and assessment. The bill recognizes the importance of including Alaska Native tribal governance systems in the educational program.

SENATOR HUGHES shared that she preferred the previous version. She is concerned about a teacher who has students who know they don't have to pass a test they take. She hopes that won't be a problem for teachers. If students take some courses as freshmen, they might have trouble taking a test a few years later. The committee heard one of most passionate speeches from Commissioner Johnson about how necessary this bill is, and holding students more accountable for passing the test would be better. The committee substitute is an improvement over not having civics education at all. She understands the feedback from the districts. The transcript will show that students took the test. She wishes the transcript would show whether students passed or failed the exam, even if that would not prevent them from graduating. Some students might be motivated by pride if they knew it would show up on their transcripts. She does not want to hand teachers a problem, and some districts may decide to grade the test and incorporate it into a class. This is better than the current status where it is possible that no or minimal civics are taught.

SENATOR STEVENS said he appreciates her comments. At first, his office thought it should be a high-stakes test but his office learned from communities that there are some problems with that. The key part of the committee substitute is that DEED will develop curriculum and an assessment. As the committee just heard from the Professional Teaching Practices Commission appointee, that should be presented throughout the curriculum, not just in one single class. He asked Mr. Lamkin to explain how his office decided to remove the high-stakes exam.

SENATOR HUGHES said that it is good that the end of bill requires that student performance on the assessment will be reported to the legislature by district. Even though students will not need a certain grade to get a diploma, the legislature will learn how students are doing. That is a good feature.

9:29:34 AM

TIM LAMKIN, Staff, Senator Gary Stevens, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, said the bill reflects some discussions with the department, particularly the commissioner, and concerns about high-stakes exams. This seemed like a reasonable approach, to put a greater emphasis on standards and offer curriculum developed by Alaskans, as well as Alaska's own unique assessment. That assessment will be taken and not necessarily passed. It will first trigger a review of content standards on government and citizenship that were adopted in 2006. It is timely to review and adjust them accordingly and to reflect the system of government for the indigenous people of Alaska.

SENATOR HUGHES asked if Alaska history or government is required for graduation or if it is a district decision.

MR. LAMKIN replied there is no state requirement, although some districts require it.

SENATOR MICCICHE echoed the concerns of Senator Hughes. He had a recent conversation with another senator about getting a foot in the door and proving its value over time and getting to the point of being able to test to know that students are retaining information. This goes way back. He read a Forbes article in which Lincoln talked about teaching children reverence for the Constitution and its laws lest the American democracy degenerate into what he called "mobocratic" rule. In Reagan's farewell address he echoed Lincoln and called for informed patriotism. The article also spoke to the generational divide. Seventy-four percent of senior citizens can pass the test but only 19 percent of Americans under the age of 45 can answer even six of the 10 questions. Division in the country is based in part on an essential misunderstanding of how government works and functions. It causes part of the mistrust because "we the people" don't understand the power they hold because they don't understand the workings of government itself. It is incredibly important and he is supportive of the bill. He does wish the committee had pushed for a test. He will not get in the way of

the bill, and maybe a foot in the door is the right path at this time.

CHAIR HOLLAND called on invited testimony.

9:33:39 AM

JULIE TRUSKOWSKI, State Coordinator, We The People, Anchorage, Alaska, thanked the committee for the opportunity to speak about the important topic of reinvigorating civics in public schools. She is a retired, nationally board certified teacher with 28 years of experience in Alaska. She is the state coordinator for the We the People program. It is a nationally-recognized curriculum from the nonpartisan Center for Civics Education that teaches civics competency and responsibility. Several legislators have served as judges in the high school state competition. We the People checks off quite a few boxes for learning and assessing knowledge of civics and the Constitution. The curriculum culminates in mock Congressional hearings. It truly is educating for a purpose. In the era of unfunded mandates and austere budgeting, We the People is cost effective in that it already exists in many communities. Around 25 communities in the state already have We the People material on hand, from many schools in the Anchorage and Fairbanks districts to smaller schools. Those schools should already have textbooks. That could be useful information as legislators move forward with SB 72.

SENATOR STEVENS asked her about the issue of the high-stakes vs removing the need for passing an exam.

MS. TRUSKOWSKI answered that if kids know there is accountability, they will up their game. She agreed with Senator Hughes. It is easy to overlook something with no accountability. That might be what happened with civics education and why it has fallen off the radar. Social studies in general is an unfunded mandate with no accountability piece, so it gets overlooked and pushed aside. She doesn't necessarily like the idea of an assessment that is something like questions on the citizenship test because it promotes rote learning instead of internalizing knowledge and articulating what has been learned, which is what We the People does.

9:37:34 AM

SENATOR HUGHES asked if We the People is an afterschool program or done during the school day. She asked if any schools used We the People as curriculum to meet government requirements.



MS. TRUSKOWSKI said that at the last national meeting of state coordinators for We the People, she learned that Florida has a civics test requirement for graduation. Nevada recently got legislative funding for We the People to be taught in all schools. It cannot be an afterschool program. It must be incorporated into the curriculum. It can be time consuming but it can be tailored to shorter amounts of time. She taught it in sixth grade and used one of six units. This year the state competition was virtual and only West Valley High School was able to participate by using fewer components.

[9:40:17 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND opened public testimony.

[9:40:27 AM](#)

DAVID NEES, representing self, Anchorage, Alaska, said he is a retired teacher who worked with student councils for years. He is a fan of the civics bill. This is a good bill. Pulling the citizenship test out takes the teeth out of it. Districts usually say it is unfunded mandate. The argument is whether to make it a stick or carrot. Students could get civics credit by passing the citizenship test, and it could be regular credit if they don't take the test. It could be an honors course if they do pass the test. Another option is to allow We the People for credit. These are ideas for carrots rather than sticks.

[9:42:27 AM](#)

JOANNA WASSILLIE, representing self, White Mountain, Alaska, said that she appreciated the comments of Danette Peterson, the Professional Teaching Practices Commission appointee who spoke earlier. Ms. Wassillie is a high school and middle school language arts and social studies teacher who is teaching government now. She liked what Ms. Peterson said about civics being taught across the curriculum, starting in younger grades. Civics is an important part of citizenship and personal development. All seem to agree that it needs to be bolstered in the state and country. To make citizenship an intrinsic value and strength in the state, this must begin at the younger grades. As far as testing, her worry about passing a test as an alternative to taking a course is that it would become more rote learning as opposed to becoming an intrinsic and lifelong practice for students. That is why she likes incorporating civics standards across curriculum in all grade levels. She is planning to look at using We the People next year.

[9:44:50 AM](#)

CHRISTINE HUTCHISON, representing self, Kenai, Alaska, said that she is crazy about civics education for children and adults. She participated with the local school board social studies curriculum committee twice. Just teaching to the standards is not sufficient. There must be a requirement that this be taught. She is going to look into We the People. She would like to see some type of testing. Lowering standards for any purpose is not useful. If people don't learn and defend the Constitution, the country is going to be in a very sad state as Senator Micciche outlined. She is hopeful that this bill will become law. It is critical to have a civics education requirement. This needs to be pass. This is a feel-good, limited fiscal issue.

SENATOR MICCICHE said he has talked about this with Ms. Hutchinson. He thanked her for calling. He would like to know what she finds out about what the district is doing about this topic and asked her to share anything she learns with the committee.

[9:48:52 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND closed public testimony. He solicited a motion.

[9:49:27 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS moved to report the proposed committee substitute (CS) for SB 72, work order 32-LS0478\B, from committee with individual recommendations and attached fiscal note(s).

CHAIR HOLLAND found no objection and CSSB 72 (EDC) was reported from the Senate Education Standing Committee.

[9:49:49 AM](#)

At ease

[9:52:53 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND reconvened the meeting and noted the committee had an item to address. He solicited a motion.

[9:53:05 AM](#)

SENATOR STEVENS moved that the committee approve work order 32-LS0485\W [subsequently numbered SB 111] as a Senate Education Standing Committee bill for introduction to the Senate.

[9:53:17 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH objected. He said there are a number of different bills before the body dealing with the general subject of the

power the chair would be granted under this motion. He said he had hoped that the process that the Senate president initiated would have led the committee to a piece of legislation that all members of the committee could support. He has seen a draft of the bill and he identified a number of areas that are deeply problematic and do not reflect the bills that were discussed in committee over four different hearings. While this bill is a committee bill, he wants the public to know that he does not support it at this time. He will speak to why he does not support the bill as the committee goes through the process in the hope that the bill that finally comes out of this committee is one he can support.

[9:54:59 AM](#)

SENATOR BEGICH said he takes his role on the committee seriously, as does each committee member. He continued to say:

We represent the leadership of this body on this committee - the president, the minority leader, the majority leader, and Rules chair. We have identified that the key components, based on years and years and years of research and work, both in-state and out-of-state, focus on certain elements that have to come together to make working legislation that has a meaningful impact on families. At this time, having extensively and personally reviewed the drafts, having discussed those with you, I just don't see it here.

SENATOR BEGICH said he will address his questions and comments when the bill is heard but he was withdrawing his objection at this time.

[9:55:33 AM](#)

CHAIR HOLLAND found no further objection and announced the motion passed.

[9:55:54 AM](#)

There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Holland adjourned the Senate Education Standing Committee at 9:55 a.m.